Role of Media Houses and Social Media Influencers in Undermining Democratic Institutions of Pakistan

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Abstract
In Pakistan's highly polarized political environment, media houses, as well as social media influencers have become key players in helping to shape political narratives and people's perceptions of democratic institutions. The media's increasing entanglement with misinformation, sensationalism, and digital populism have led to serious concerns on the institutional legitimacy and the resilience of democracy despite the need for democratic accountability and civic engagement. This study examines media houses and social media influencers change public narratives concerning democratic institutions. And how the misinformation propagated by media is for strengthening or weakening the public trust in these institutions. The study is based on the agenda-setting theory, framing theory, Herman and Chomsky Manufacturing Consent model, modern warfare of information, Quality news content and digital influencer discourse. The election-related misinformation, judicial narratives, the vote of no confidence in 2022 and the event of 9 May, 2023 shows that the unchecked spread of misinformation by the media and digital platforms harm public trust in these institutions. The research arrives to the conclusion that it is needed to improve digital literary, to control the information warfare and to maintain the Pakistan, regulating the overreaching and the media ethics is also required.

Key words: Misinformation, Media Houses, Influencers ,Democratic Institutions, Polarization.

Introduction:
Democratic institutions are based upon, fundamentally, public trust, informed participation, and free flow of credible information. The media, according to McQuail (2010), plays an important role as an intermediary between states and citizens in democratic systems by issuing political awareness, public debate and accountability. The media's significance is now greatly increased in Pakistan, where democratic consolidation has been fragile because of political instability and low institutional autonomy. Over the past two decades, the rapid expansion of private media houses and digital platforms, has reshaped the landscape of Pakistan's political communication. influencing public perceptions of democratic institutions and how they are contested.

 Since the early 2000s, Pakistan's media has shifted from being controlled by the state to a competitive, commercial market after electronic media was liberalized (Siraj, 2009). More TV news channels and social media have allowed greater political expression, but they have also increased political polarization and sensationalism. Algorithmic amplification and the rise of emotionally charged information are making it harder to tell the difference between journalism, political advocacy, and opinion-based communication

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(Chadwick, 2017).

In addition to reporting on events, the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, particularly in political context. As agenda-setting theory stated that the public see that topic more important if media highlights it. Framing theory suggests that the presentation of information affect the public perception on that. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, you 1993). Continuous media coverage of issues such as electoral fraud, corruption, and institutional bias has influenced public perceptions of democratic institutions in Pakistan, leading to increased cynicism and reduced trust.

Misinformation related to elections, judicial narratives, the vote of no confidence in 2022, and the events of May 9, 2023, highlights how unauthentic and digital misinformation can affect public trust in democratic institutions (International Crisis Group, 2023). In the above cases the misinformation spread by the media houses shape these institutions as biased actors rather than the neutral bodies.

By highlighting how power structures, political pressures, and economic interests shape media content, Herman and Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent model provides a useful lens for analyzing these trends (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). In Pakistan, the media often function within complex networks of institutional and political influence, which can undermine editorial independence and lead to biased or selective reporting. The media becomes a battlefield for challenging democratic authority when combined with modern propaganda strategies, where narratives are purposefully constructed to change the perceptions and reliability (pomerantsev, 2019).

Research on Pakistan has mostly evaluated traditional media and social media separately, despite a rising focus on misinformation and digital politics. Research on how media houses and social media influencers work together in order to create narratives that undermine democratic institutions has been severely missing. By investigating how media-driven misinformation and narrative methods affect public confidence in democratic institutions, this study aims to fill that gap. This study uses qualitative analyses of news content and digital influencer discourse, based in agenda-setting theory, framing theory, the Manufacturing Consent model, and the concept of information warfare. It examines at how media narratives support or undermine democratic legitimacy by focusing on major political events and institutional disputes.

Literature review:
The media thus forms a vital support in systems of democracy in informing the citizens, allowing discussions about politics, and making state institutions accountable. According to classical democratic theory one criterion on which democracy can be adjudged legitimate is that citizens must be well-informed and media is perceived to be the only major channel through which political information is transmitted to the general public (Dahl, 1989). McQuail lists autonomy functioning, fair coverage, and political accountability as the features of democratic media systems, But when the media becomes subject to political impetus, commercial interests or sensationalism, it ends up weakening democracy rather than strengthening it.

The researchers point out that confidence in democratic institutions by the general public is very much determined by the type of representation they get through the media. Norris discusses the problem of continued negative and conflictive media coverage to the point of creating distrust in those institutions, especially in democracies where institutions are already viewed as fragile. In some countries, such as Pakistan, where democratic institutions have faced ongoing legitimacy and sustainability issues, media coverage can be playing a crucial role in influencing public trust or skepticism.

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According to McCombs and Shaw, through the process of agenda-setting, the media shapes the concept of the citizens about the political issues of the country, for instance by highlighting certain issues and ignoring other issues. The continuous attention of the media upon some political controversy or allegation affects the perception of the citizens about the performance of the government.

The theory of framing goes on to talk about the fact that media is not just the attention but also the interpretation. In a politically divided society, the framing tends to break down the process of more complicated institutional processes to the moral "Right" and "Wrong" experience of democracy. The study gives a clear explanation of how conflict-oriented framing towards the democratic institutions makes the society cynical and delegitimizes democracy (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010).

Analyzing the context of Pakistan, it has been observed that the frame of elections and the judicial pronouncements and parliamentary business are often dictated by the partisan narrative and thus have the tendency to accentuate the divisions on partisan implications in the country (Riaz, 2015). The opening up of the electronic media in the early 2000s resulted in a major paradigm shift in the politics in Pakistan. According to a study conducted by Siraj in 2009, the rise in the number of private TV channels brought politics into the spotlight and increased opinions and discussions in the media, but on the other hand, it led to a rise in the competition between the different media groups.

 There have been a few cases when this type of media environment has helped polarization on political issues. According to Wolfsfeld (2011), the media of a competitive market tends to have a dramatization effect, which is frequently seen in the political crisis. Television media in Pakistan tend to present the political events in the form of confrontation between various political entities, and this makes people see the political institutions as having a bias, not neutrality (Yusuf, 2019).The dawn of social media has completely changed political communication. According to Chadwick (2017), modern politics has witnessed the introduction of the "hybrid media system," whereby mainstream media and new media both feed off each other in their accounts. In Pakistan the contents of television programmes are frequently extended via social media outlets too, but the mainstream narratives are receiving influence from the narratives on social media as well.

Social media influencers can also be classified as good mass communicators under the current media system that is dominated by hybrid media. Based on a study by Abidin in 2018 on the process of how influencers become authoritative communicators on issues of relevance to society, they do so based on their authenticity and emotions, as opposed to their professionalism. In contrast to journalists that are working under many ethical constraints, influencers are free to operate, with a major role to play as mass communicators. Studies have found that politically aligned influencers are actively involved in the creation of content relating to politics, protests, judicial verdicts and military-civilian government relations in Pakistan. This content is simplified and emotionally charged and is easily multiplied by algorithms, at the expense of accuracy (Sunstein, 2017).

Disinformation and misinformation have been identified as serious threats to democratic institutions everywhere in the world. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), democratic decision-making is affected by information disorder, as it leads to misperception of people's knowledge; therefore, people distrust institutions. Online platforms have been utilized in spreading false narratives, which have spread rapidly when there is political instability.

In Pakistan, the problem of misinformation related to elections, the judiciary proceedings and political protests has been well studied. International reports show how

unsubstantiated and emotionally laced assertions across the 2022 vote of no confidence and on the 9th of May 2023 contributed to heightened tensions in Pakistani politics (International Crisis Group 2023). This cycle of the exposure of these narratives results in more skepticism in the society on the democracy.

Information warfare is an interesting tool in analyzing contemporary political communication. Information warfare involves the use of information with the purpose of influencing perceptions and emotions and not informing (Pomerantsev, 2019). It is different from traditional propaganda in that information warfare involves an amalgamation of various propaganda tools, including using the internet, use of repetition, use of framing of messages around emotions, and networked amplification of messages.

It has been argued that information warfare has gained a greater view in the internal political sphere whereby information or narrative warfare has been a strategy of attacking institutions and political opponents (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Within the context of the case study country, Pakistan, there has been growing narrative warfare against institutions that pose a threat to the political stability of democracy. The Herman and Chomsky model of "Manufacturing Consent" would provide a structural approach to the study of the media. The Herman and Chomsky model posits that the contents of the media are not a function of the news routines of journalists, but ideologies, the imperatives of ownership and advertisers, etc.

In the case of Pakistan, there is the understanding that the media corporations have been functioning under the different political and economic pressures that have shaped the lack of independence in their editorial (Siraj & Hussain, 2018). These pressures are the foundation of the prejudiced representation of the democratic institutions by the media. Although there has been a substantial amount of literature on media influence, misinformation and political communication that has contributed significantly to the pool of knowledge in this regard, there is still a lacuna in the current state of studies that address traditional media houses and social media influencers together in the hybrid media system in Pakistan. Most of the research has involved these actors separately, without conducting suitable research on how their narratives, combined, work to undermine democratic institutions. Further, there is not much attention that has been paid to domestic information war as a systematic threat to institutional legitimacy.

The present study addresses this gap by bringing together agenda-setting theory, framing theory, manufacture of consent and information warfare in its study to address questions of public narratives that media houses and social media influencers frame to construct the trust of the public in the democratic institutions of Pakistan.

Research questions:
1- How do media houses and social media influencers shape public perception on Democratic institutions of Pakistan?
2- Does this influence, strengthen or weaken trust in these institutions?

Research design:
The research adopts a qualitative methodology to analyze the role of the media houses and social media influencers and their role in shaping public perceptions and trust in democratic institutions in Pakistan. A qualitative approach was selected as the nature of the study is more concerned with understanding narratives, meanings and perceptions rather than measuring numerical data. This approach allows in-depth exploration of complex interactions involving the media content, the influencer discourse, and public opinion, which are impossible to make with quantitative techniques.

Data were gathered from news articles, the media coverage on television news, and social media posts focused on key political events such as the Vote of No Confidence in 2022 and the events of 9th May 2023. Both mainstream media and social media influencers were included in order to capture the full spectrum of stories that public perception is being based on. The research used methods of content analysis to identify recurring themes, topics and tones and the methods of discourse analysis for analyzing how narratives were constructed, framed, and amplified.

This methodology was adopted because it will enable the researcher to find patterns and mechanisms and the effect of media stories on people's perception and trust for their institutions.

By combining qualitative analysis with theoretical frameworks such as agenda-setting theory, framing theory, Herman and Chomsky's pirate theory of imperialism, and porn theory of climate change, the book of Casey Miller arguing that the media serves as a tool used for propaganda, develops a conclusion and elaborates it using evidence gathered in the second chapter, and so on. Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent model and Information war Presentation, study provides a comprehensive understanding about the media influence over democracy in Pakistan.

Theoretical framework:
This research is based on an integrated theoretical framework borrowed from agenda setting theory, framing theory, the Manufacturing Consent e.g. model by Herman and Chomsky and information warfare. Together, these viewpoints provide a round out understanding of the way the media houses and social media influencers control political narratives, influence public perception and destroy the trust in democratic institutions in Pakistan.

Agenda-setting theory is the theory of power of media to influence the public agenda through controlling what issues are given public attention for a sustained period of time. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), media may not be telling audiences what to think, but it is significant to influencing what they think about. In the case of the polarized political situation in the country, media houses and social media influencers have been over and over showing some of the political controversies, such as electoral integrity and judiciary and institutional conflicts and marginalizing others. This selective emphasis lifts certain stories to the level of national agenda while influencing the understanding of the public on institutions of democracy. In this research, the science of agenda-setting is applied to investigate the effects of media attention to institutional controversies over time and its role in the frame of democratic institutions as a site of political contestation.

Later, framing theory focuses upon media interpretations of and meanings attached to issues. Entman (1993) claims that framing is the selection of aspects of reality in order to make them more salient in order to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations and moral evaluations. We see media houses and influencers often use frames which prioritize conflict, blame and emotional appeal that turn complex democratic processes into polarized narratives. This study applies the theory of framing to analyze the Democratic institutions as biased, illegitimate or conspiratorial by use of language, tone and symptomatic representation in media content and influencer discourse.

The Manufacturing Consent model, created by Herman and Chomsky (1988), presents a structural explanation for the behavior of media by highlighting some of the political and economic constraints influencing media output. The model posits that media content is subject to the influences of ownership interests, advertising pressure, political affiliations and ideology, which restrict editorial independence. In the case of media houses in

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Pakistan, they function against the backdrop of complex networks of political and institutional pressure, and this has an impact on the representation of democratic institutions. This study applies the Manufacturing Consent model to an examination of patterns of selective reporting, narrative bias and omission to explain the role of media structures in the building of public consent or dissent towards democratic institutions.

The concept of information warfare continues to reinforce the theoretical approach in that it addresses the strategic contribution of information for the manipulation efforts of perceptions, emotions and legitimacy as their objectives instead of objective information. Pomerantsev (2019) highlights the core role of repetition, emotion and amplification in digital age war to manipulate public opinion. In the hybrid media system of Pakistan, media houses and social media influencers are frequently active participants in battles of the narrative in the political crisis.

This study will include the application of the concept of information warfare in analyzing the process through which misinformation and disinformation campaigns undermine the incredibility of institutions and increase the level of political polarization. These theories are used in an integrated fashion to understand the complexity of the environment of the Pakistan media. Together, they bring a powerful analytical framework in which to examination how the media houses and social media influencers are impacting on the public trust and contributing to the undermining of the legitimacy of democracy in Pakistan.

Discussion:

This study focused on the role played by the media houses and social media influence on the public's perception of democratic institutions in Pakistan and determined whether this fact leads to the building of public trust within the institutions or whether there is a lack of public trust in the institutions. The findings display that media narratives and influencer discourse significantly contribute to how the public understands at large, often resulting in polarization, misinformation and de legitimization, which challenges democratic stability. Regarding the first research question, media and influencers do affect the perceptual process by choosing significant political issues, consistently portraying institutional courses of action as if they were emotionally charged or conspiratorial, and enhancing selective narratives. Institutions such as the Parliament, the judicial power, and the Electoral institutions are too often depicted as biased or compromised, as opposed to neutral, in the case of Lithuanians who evaded the Vote of No Confidence in 2022 or the 9 May 2023 events. These dynamics are the way they happen through the agenda setting, framing, and narrative amplification (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). In a polarized media scenario in Pakistan, the abovementioned mechanisms are washing out the people's understanding, and democracy is being shown not as a constitutional function but as a political struggle, thus eroding institutional legitimacy.

For the second research question, the study finds that the effect of media on public trust is quite weak. Misinformation, sensational reporting and emotionally manipulative stories lead to a sense of cynicism and constitutional process de legitimization. Democratic theory lays emphasis on the critical role of trust in institutions in achieving stability and citizen engagement (Norris, 2011). The implications of the Vote of No Confidence phenomenon and that of 9 May 2023 illustrate to the point how the media-driven news turned constitutional disputes into legitimacy crises, which destroyed the power of Parliament, the flesh and blood of the judiciary, and public confidence.

The damage only becomes more compounded by structural pressures made clear by the Models of Manufacturing Consent of Herman and Chomsky: Ownership, Political

alignments as well as commercial incentives (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Social media influencers also add to this crippling effect of prioritizing engagement over actuality. From an information warfare point of view the media platforms control the perception by repetition and framing of emotion, to normalize the hostile attitude on institutions (Pomerantsev, 2019).

These findings are important because for Pakistan's democracy to be stable, institutional trust is essential. Media houses and influencers, rather than reinforcing accountability, have become political conflict actors. Without enhanced regulation, enforcement of ethical standards, and digital literacy, it is likely that the De legitimization of democratic institutions is the path forward and that substantive degradation of the robustness of democratic institutions is that way.

Case Studies:
Vote of no confidence 2022:
The Vote of No Confidence in 2022 was a constitutionally sanctioned parliamentary process in order to hold the government in charge. Despite it being a routine democratic process the media coverage and social media discourse adopted the language of conspiracy of political engineering, stressing the alleged foreign interference and suspension of the popular legitimacy of parliamentary decision-making processes.

Media framing gets down to the level of narratives of betrayal, victimhood and outside manipulation, with an emphasis on partisan commentary and unproven claims. Social media influencers displaced these frames and broadcast highly emotive content and speculations to millions of users, leading to an increase in the polarity of the political debate. As a consequence, views about the suffrage moved away from acceptance of the vote as a legitimate constitutional mechanism and towards a view that the vote was illegitimate and under foreign influence. Many citizens took performance in parliament as being biased or corrupt, diminishing the faith of the elected and of democracy itself.

The cumulative impact of such media and influencer activities led to institutional harm in that it arose as a result of the invalidation of parliamentary power, rendering mistrust of electoral power and normalizing public mistrust over the electoral process and the constitutional process in general. The way the event was framed added to the de legitimization of Parliament over the long term and the political polarization of the country.

Events of 9 May 2023:
The events of 9 May 2023 were in politics, with mass restriction of political passions, protests and manifestations of political opinion, the provision of court decisions, and political processes. Media houses and influencers gave massive coverage to the events, where selective visuals, emotive words and sensational headlines were frequently employed. Coverage focused on the conflict, the chaos and institutional failure and was used to portray the events as marking a tarnished political system.

Social media influencers played an important role in proliferating such narratives, sharing videos, images, and commentary that were emotive in nature and often not even verified. These narratives invited public outrage and contributed towards a perception of institutional weakness that helped generate perceptions of state authorities, as well as democratic institutions, as incapable of taking care of the interests of citizenry. Public perception was molded heavily by these stories with many of the families believing democratic institutions such as the judiciary and law enforcement that are partisan, ineffective or corrupt. This was a widespread perception of institutional failure that contributed to polarization and distrust in democratic governance in society.

The institutional damage that was produced through these media practices consisted of

further: The democratization of judicial credibility and extra-constitutional political action normalization. The events of 9 May 2023 have shown how the alignment of framing in the media across the media ecosystem and amplify by influencers, Height, have the potential to further embolden political crises, shake the confidence people had in public institutions and raise questions over their perceived legitimacy.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that the media houses and social media influencers in Pakistan provide popularization on the perception of democratic institutions mainly in the dynamics of agenda, framing and amplification of the narrative frame. These practices tend to lead to distortion of public understanding, spread of misinformation and lack of trust, as in the vote of no confidence exercises in 2022 and incidences of 9th may 2023 The research brings out that this influence is predominantly subversive to institutional legitimize, leading to polarization and delegitimize the Parliament, the Judicial and Electoral bodies. The broader message is that with media and influencers, there is the potential for changing the transparency and accountability of governments, but if abused, they can have a very negative impact on the stability of democracy. In order to overcome such a challenge the importance of strengthening media ethics, enforcing regulatory oversight and fostering digital literacy amongst citizens in order to critically engage with media content is highlighted. Encouraging responsible journalism, fact-checking and accountability, both on the part of media houses and social media influencers can help to reduce the level of misinformation and re-build public trust. Ultimately, maintaining
Pakistan's democracy will deter any libertarianism as far as media is concerned that can cover all forms of irresponsible media practices to propagate sustainable media practices supporting liberty and generally freedom of expression to make informed decisions for the citizens.

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